

# PAWA NA PIPEL!

pawa *n.* electricity; Ol Elkom katim pawa asde. Elcom disrupted electricity supply yesterday.

pawa *n.* strength; Em i gat pawa long karim dispela semen. He's got the strength to carry this bag of cement.

Pipel *n.* people; Ol pipel bilong mi i makim mi long kamap memba bilong Palimen. My people elected me to be a member of the Parliament.

*Ilokpisin English Bahasa Dictionary* 1997

This interview was carried out in Autumn 2003 by an SSP activist who had travelled to Papua New Guinea to provide medical support to West Papuan refugees. The interview is with a well known radical lawyer and activist from 'MelSol' – a broad coalition of many of those opposed to the present neo-colonial situation in PNG.

While I've been here in Papua New Guinea there have been a number of events maybe worth mentioning. One of the biggest was the continuing strike by Telecom workers, against the possibility of privatisation. The headline of one of the PNG newspapers was 'City sabotage'. Telecom cables severed, half of NCD in chaos' with the insinuation that this was done by workers as part of the strike. As part of general workers' struggles, is

this tactic of sabotage used often in Papua New Guinea?

I think this would be one of the first times that workers have resorted to this type of strategy. In the past they have tried to keep within the law. I think it's more out of desperation over the situation they're facing.

The strike has had quite a lot of effect in terms of breaking communication links here in PNG, for instance it's been

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# City sabotage

## Telikom cables severed, half of NCD in chaos

By PEKU PILIMBO

TELECOMMUNICATION cables were sabotaged in Port Moresby on Monday night, throwing parts of NCD and Papua New Guinea into chaos.

Criminals poured petrol into a cable-main along Waigani Drive and set it alight, destroying international and domestic communication lines linking Gerehu and Waigani areas in NCD and Lorengau, Mendi, Daru, Tari and Buka.

Telikom management said yesterday that contractors were replacing the burnt-out cables yesterday. The destruction included the optic fibre line that is the international carrier. E-mail and Internet services were also disrupted in the area. Mobile telephones, facsimile and even banking services and airline booking services were down.

Among state institutions affected were the Telikom Rumana building which is the headquarters of Telikom PNG Ltd, The National Parliament, National Government departments, the University of PNG, The Telikom Earth Station, Gordon's Industrial area, National Capital District Commission, several commercial banks, hotels and guest houses.

Telikom management said some communication links should be restored by today as contractors were working round-the-clock.

Those responsible have yet to be caught.

The destruction of the cables near the former



Rasa Communication worker Peter Gend attending to the burnt cable along Waigani Drive yesterday. Rasa Communication is contracted by Telikom to maintain affected lines.  
Nationalistic by EKAH KEAPO.

Arrows Club took place at about 8pm. During the day, the PNG Communication Workers Union which comprised mainly of Telikom workers, went on a half-day stop-work meeting on Monday and continued into yesterday while

union executives met with Independent Public Business Corporation (IPBC) to iron-out workers' grievances.

"The persons responsible knew exactly what they were doing. It couldn't have been done by

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**difficult for some of the banking systems to operate. Personally, how do you view the likelihood of their success?**

I think in terms of their immediate concern which is their benefits and entitlements prior to privatisation, it seems like it has worked. The privatisation commission or whatever they call it now,

has agreed to meet most of their demands before the telecommunications company privatises. So it appears to have been a successful strategy, although they are still negotiating.

**This struggle against Telecom is just the most recent episode in a long period of struggles against privatisation here in**

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**Papua New Guinea. Maybe you could talk a bit about the demonstrations a couple of years ago which were also against some of the global institutions such as the World Bank and IMF; we heard in the West about a number of students being shot on the demonstrations, but could you give us a better picture of it?**

Yes, I think the history of these struggles against privatisation and the World Bank/IMF programme in Papua New Guinea goes a long way back into the early '90s; around '91 or '92 was when the World Bank/IMF started to become more pro-active in Papua New Guinea in terms of trying to influence the policies and political directions of the country. But also at the time, the government was changing, so the World Bank could not really implement its programmes, but in '94, '95 the World Bank/IMF made a major effort to influence the direction of the country, coming in with the Structural Adjustment Programme and so many conditions that the government had to adopt before it could receive any more assistance from the World Bank/IMF.

They gave about 35 conditions that the government must adopt. And that was of course, challenged by the public, students, workers organisations, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), community organisations, and eventually it was reduced to 15 main terms and conditions, but the key elements of the newly brought in policies of the World Bank were still there. Like opening up the economy, stopping wage increases or freezing wages, reducing government spending and all those things, those were still in place.

Also one of the key programmes in Papua New Guinea was to register clan land, because in PNG at least 95% of land

is owned by community groups, through their clans. And I think the World Bank and IMF found that that this was against the interest of global capital, that it made it hard for global capital to have access to land. That was one of their major pushes to change the law, to make it compulsory for clans to register their land, so they can be available for development. We – political organisations, NGOs, churches – we convened on the parliament and forced the government to put a stop to that part of the World Bank programme. But it was not altogether put away, as you know; they put it on the shelf and tried to revive it in various forms and that saw the action by the students in the year 2002, which resulted in a police fight, with students and members of the public being shot by the police.

So, there's been a long struggle against the World Bank/IMF for Papua New Guinea; also it's been a struggle about the type of development or type of political-economic direction that people think the country should take. There's been a lot of opposition against World Bank/IMF programmes because people have seen it's not working in other countries. But since those killings, I think it has affected the



## Anti-Capitalism From Barcelona to Papua

*June 24th 2001 Barcelona, Spain:*

More than 30,000 people took to the streets in Barcelona, Spain, to celebrate the decision by the World Bank to cancel its scheduled meeting. The World Bank bailed out, fearing massive demonstrations and unrest. Many corporate businesses along the route had windows smashed and were covered with anti-capitalist graffiti. Towards the end of the demonstration, riot police attacked the crowd with tear gas and truncheons. Thirty two people were injured and 19 arrested.

*June 28th 2001 Port Moresby, PNG:* At least five students are confirmed dead and others in a critical condition after riot police dispersed (using tear gas and automatic weapons) a five day blockade of government buildings. The students were protesting against World Bank economic reform and believe that privatisation will place large parts of the economy under foreign control. The students demand that the World Bank pull out of Papua New Guinea. The shootings sparked looting and the burning of government vehicles.

— Earth First! Journal (North America)  
Lugnasadh 2001

mass organisations a bit, we haven't come out again to give a direction to the struggle. People are in some sense still recovering from the killings. It was something completely unexpected that the police would shoot people in that type of situation. Although there's been one or two shootings during the initial struggle against the clan land registration in '94,

'95, people did not expect that a lot of people would be shot.

**Five were killed and around 70 were shot and injured.**

That's correct. I think that has had an effect on the mass organisations, those of us who have been in the forefront of the struggle. The students, definitely, it affected them. So we haven't come around to re-grouping and re-energising ourselves to have a go again at the World Bank/IMF programme. That's not to say they have successfully implemented their programmes; the land registration decision has been shelved, the privatisation programme so far has only managed to amalgamate the state bank with a private company; it's still 49% state owned. So, to an extent we have frustrated the privatisation programme in Papua New Guinea. But the challenge, I think, remains that we have to come up with an alternate policy; it's not been advocated clearly and it's not been put forward in a way that the community can see that there are viable alternatives that we can pursue other than the World Bank/IMF programme.

**Okay. Can you just give us some figures, roughly, on how many people were involved for instance in the parliament occupations, and the numbers on the student demonstration in 2002?**

Okay. I wouldn't be able to give you the number involved in the student demonstration, I was out of the country at the time, probably about 1,000. But in the '94, '95 march on the parliament, we were about, maybe 3,000 or 4,000.

**One of the things you touched on just then is the customary land ownership**

**and it's probably worth going into that a bit more and what that means here in Papua New Guinea. For me, it's been quite eye-opening to come to a country where a majority of the land is not only owned by the people but is owned collectively by the people in a legally unregistered form. This is the absolute opposite of Britain where every tiny bit is owned on paper by a named individual, and most of the land is owned by only a few people.**

**I think it's very unusual in quite a lot of the developing world for that customary land ownership to still hold in law. That's meant that a lot of struggles that happen in other countries against, for instance, local logging and development would often turn into mass opposition or guerrilla struggle, whereas in Papua New Guinea they have been carried out through a legal struggle in the courts because there is that backbone, which is absent in most countries.**

So I was wondering if you could talk a bit about some of these land struggles which have been continuing in Papua New Guinea, and which I think are unusual in the developing world in the fact that they've had some success. I read for instance in the newspaper today, (14th October 2003), that the forestry exports from PNG are going down now, and one of the reasons they're giving is that the NGOs are continually successful in blocking new logging licences being put out when they're advocating for local people. Even though I've personally seen lots of logging going on by Malaysians etc., the fact that they're moaning that their industry is in decline because of advocacy power is quite unusual.

Well, as I said, in PNG the social situation is quite unique. In Papua New Guinea the law recognises the customary clan ownership of land; most of the land in Papua New Guinea is customarily owned by clans. Only about 5% is state owned or alienated land, alienated land being patches taken over during colonial times. And so most of the land is customary owned by clans or tribes, not by individuals; it cannot be sold by individuals or mortgaged by individuals, and the law in PNG forbids selling of customary land. The only way you can deal with it is that you have to get it surveyed and then go through a complicated process whereby if there's no objection, it's approved as alienated land; then you can mortgage it. Alternatively, the law allows, if you want to retain it as customary land but develop it commercially you can lease it to the state and the state sub-lets it to the developer or



## Island Ecologies

The large island of New Guinea harbours a spectacular variety of ecosystems. Alpine regions, montane forests, grassland and mangroves are all found. While an increasing part of the island is being encroached on by industrialism, much remains wild and diverse.

Precipitous mountain ranges serve as effective barriers, isolating highland valley species. This division has resulted in amazing amounts of specialisation and evolutionary change – culminating in tens of thousands of species.

Among the vast forest, hundreds of birds species – many endemic – soar through the canopy. Most famous are New Guinea's brightly coloured birds of paradise. Meanwhile, on the ground there are three species of cassowary. These enormous flightless birds feed primarily on fallen fruit.

An incredibly cute looking mammal, the spotted cuscus, climbs up among tree trunks, and is prized by Papuan hunters for its meat and thick woolly fur. More amazing still is the honey glider, a marsupial that, like the flying squirrels, has adapted to life in the canopy. The patagium, a flap of skin that connects its fore and hind limbs, allows it to glide gracefully from tree to tree in search of flower nectar.

Vast mangroves and swamps cover much of lowland New Guinea supporting a wide diversity of life, including fish, shrimp, birds and reptiles. All in all, New Guinea is one of the wildest and most precious places on earth.

whoever Most of the resources here on the land belong to the customary owners.

So, for example, you have mentioned logging. Under the law, the logs belong, or the trees belong to the customary owners. But there is a catch, because the state passed a law, the Forestry Act, which says if you want to sell your logs you have to sell the rights to the state. And then the state can give a permit to some logging company to cut the logs on your behalf and then you will be paid royalties and premiums, which is just about 5% of what they make out of the logs. Mining, which is another major area of activity in PNG, oil and gas and so on, likewise the Mining Act and the Petroleum Act says you own the land but the resources don't belong to you, they belong to the state. Customary owners are saying no, if we own the land we want what's on it. If we own the land and the logs then we should have the right to say when we should harvest it or whether we should harvest it at all. And you are right, most of the struggle is still being waged in the courts. But in Bougainville, because the courts and the parliament would not resolve that, the people resorted to armed struggle. Since Francis Ona started the struggle in that form in Bougainville, the government now is more sensitive to local people, they have to be taken into account, incorporated into decision making and so on. A lot of people benefited from what Francis Ona did in Bougainville.

**Some struggles that have been going on outside of the courts have been in the north of the country where there were some pylons going into a highland mine that were blown up, and a number of blockades against logging in the south. But some of the blockades were actually against illegal logging, so there's that**

**factor as well. I was wondering if you could say something about illegal logging; is there much of it here in PNG, given customary land ownership, or is it a minor thing?**

I would suspect that a lot of logging companies have been involved in illegal logging, for example, exceeding their concession, or engaging in bribery to get other concessions, not going through proper procedures and so on. Because there is a moratorium on logging, they try to come in to do logging by other means. In one case what they did was get some politician to agree to build a road 100m wide in the forest from nowhere to nowhere. Somehow they got the government to agree to that road being built. And you know for that road, because it involved cutting some logs, they awarded this concession to a logging company to cut the logs on the proposed log site, uh, road site. So those type of activities take place. And there are activities like when the concession is over, they just continue logging; there's hardly any forestry checks to see whether they have exceeded their concession. Those type of legal/illegal activities are going on. You may say that it's legal, but it's really done in an illegal way and given legal cover.

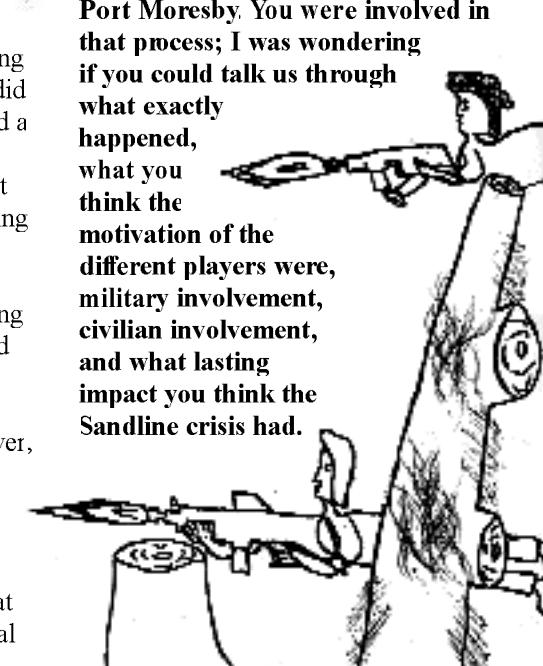
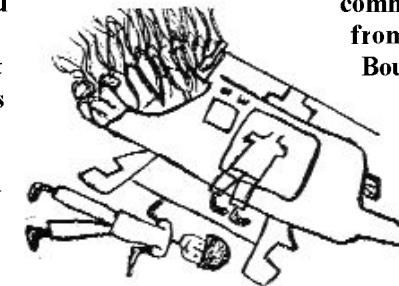
**You mentioned that quite a lot of communities have indirectly benefited from the uprising by the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) against the British**

**mining company Rio Tinto Zinc.**

**One thing that I'd like you to talk about is the Sandline crisis which came at the end**

**of nearly 10 years of successful guerrilla war by the BRA; the last option for the PNG elite was to bring in a South African and British mercenary organisation. This was defeated by a large street mobilisation in the capital here, Port Moresby. You were involved in that process; I was wondering if you could talk us through what exactly happened,**

**what you think the motivation of the different players were, military involvement, civilian involvement, and what lasting impact you think the Sandline crisis had.**



*Drawings made by a young Bougainvillean refugee. Despite fighting the well armed PNG Army with homemade guns, Bougainville closed the world's biggest copper mine. Having won the war, splits developed and the BRA founders now worry their self-described 'ecological revolution' is being sold out.*

## The Sandline Crisis

The Sandline mercenaries brought in by the PNG government were part of ‘Executive Outcomes’. At the time EO was based in the Kings Road, Chelsea, London. Since its inception in 1989 it fielded a force of over 500 elite soldiers, mostly under the command of white South African officers. They were led by Ed Barlow, ex-head of the South African Army ‘political assassination and torture wing’, and Colonel Tim Spicer, a veteran of counter-revolution in Northern Ireland. The PNG army went into full mutiny when the Sandline deal was exposed, ‘arrested’ the mercenaries and sent them packing.

To understand the mobilisation against the Sandline mercenaries, you have to appreciate that in PNG, most of the population were in sympathy with the Bougainvilleans, because they could identify with their concern, that this is a mining company that comes and gets a lot of money, dumps its waste here, kills the river, pollutes the environment, pays the people little money and then leaves. Put that scenario anywhere in PNG and there would be an uprising. So when the war started in Bougainville, there was a lot of sympathy for the Bougainvilleans, and therefore a lot of opposition to the war, that this is not a war we should be involved in.

For the soldiers, their action in challenging the Sandline mercenaries was purely on an economic basis; the soldiers had been fighting for how many years? Ten years? And being paid on a very low salary, and then along comes Sandline, who are going to be paid three times, four

times the salary. The other major factor is that in the light of the campaign against the World Bank/IMF, there was a real feeling among the people that what is happening in Bougainville will happen in PNG unless we step up and stop this nonsense. If the government gets away with using Sandline in Bougainville then they will do it everywhere in Papua New Guinea.

The mobilisation of the people on the day, at that time, it was quite unique in the sense that for the first time people were able to bridge tribal/regional allegiances to mobilise against the government. It was very clear that people were uniting for political reasons. They recognised that we have to unite for political reasons; forget tribal affiliations, clan affiliations, regional affiliations, whatever – we’ve got to take action. But on that day we were able to defeat the government because we really felt that we had to do something.

The government at the old city were circled by police. But we had to do something so went to break down the police barriers. When we came close to the army barracks, we saw this vehicle with about 10 fully armed soldiers, They said ‘Where are you going?’ and we said ‘We’re going to break down the police lines’ so that’s what we did, we invited the soldiers to come with us and we came to the first police line and we just broke it down. We knew we were going to force the government down because once we broke the police line, the people got confident and they just marched on the parliament, from everywhere in the city. Like a sea of people coming into the parliament.

The government had the special police in the parliament to protect them but they decided not to put the toughest special

police out into the street. They left the street to the ordinary police and some recruits that were still undergoing training. So once we broke their line, they got scared I think, the police. There were so many people. So they just allowed the public to march through. At some crossing we had to fight with the police, the police tried to stop us; we said, ‘If you are going to stop us, you have to shoot us. If you don’t shoot us, we’re marching through.’ And the police could not shoot us, so we marched through.

**It's probably worth mentioning something about the scale of Port Moresby. Despite being the capital and pretty much the only large city in PNG, it still only has around 500,000 people – smaller than Bristol, for instance. The parliament building is not much bigger than Manchester Town Hall. So, the scale of numbers on both sides, the ability to mobilise the state force at a local level, is severely limited by the scale of the place. There's only 5.6**

**million people in PNG. So that's something to bear in mind.**

That's correct, and you know, at the time, the state was stretched in its resources because it had soldiers and police deployed in Bougainville, and police deployed elsewhere, so they did not have a lot of police manpower at the time. I think they counted on people being afraid, and that they wouldn't do anything because the police were armed all over the city and had mounted roadblocks and nobody was going to break the police line. They failed to appreciate the anger of the people, the concern of the people that we had to stop Sandline and we had to stop this whole war otherwise we will be the victims the next time round. Not just the Bougainvilleans but everybody else.

**So, one of the organisations that we've heard about sometimes in Europe since the Sandline Incident is MelSol. Could you say something about MelSol – what it is and what it isn't?**





*The tribal guerrillas of the OPM remain largely unsupported by their neighbours across the Western colonial line that separates Papua New Guinea from West Papua.*

Well, MelSol, you know, came out of the university so it was more like a social movement. It was not a political organisation in that sense, like a political party. It was an organisation seeking out change in the minds of people and change in the political and economic direction of the country. We started in about 1987, and

from there on we have been active in the community educating people, helping them to understand PNG's position in the world, helping them to organise their own organisations, giving them political direction, basically that. Working among people and agitating from below to bring about social/political change. So that's what MelSol is and it still is that type of organisation, it has not converted into a political party. It's anti-capitalist; being from Papua New Guinea, we have to be anti-capitalist, because capitalism is against our nature, it's against the socio-economic reality of Papua New Guinea, pre-colonial and even up to now. In terms of the values of the people, they're anti-capitalist, because people in Papua New Guinea, traditionally, we share, we co-operate, we help each other. It is against our values to be greedy, to accumulate and keep for yourself.

The organisation played a significant role in the mobilisations against the World Bank/IMF and against Sandline. Although there were thousands of people involved in the campaign, people from Melsol were targeted by the government and arrested. This, along with the shootings, has in some sense exhausted people, and we're still trying to re-mobilise and re-energise for our future direction.

**The mobilisation around Sandline was fundamentally a result of a major resource war happening in the east of PNG on the island of Bougainville, started by the British company Rio Tinto Zinc. On the other side of New Guinea in the west, there's Rio Tinto Zinc again running a major mine, polluting the area and funding the Indonesian military's destruction of West Papua, so you've got a continuity over the island. Many Papua New**

**Guineans I've met definitely see themselves as New Guineans in that sense, as much as Papua New Guineans. I'd like you to say something about the response, or sometimes lack of response by Papua New Guinean organisations or individuals to the continuing tribal war of self defence and liberation by the West Papuans against Indonesia.**

I think, in Papua New Guinea, there was a deliberate policy during colonial times for Papua New Guineans not to know West Papua. And this was done in a number of ways, but the most striking way was in the schools. When the map of Papua New Guinea was presented in the schools during colonial times, it was only half a map. So most of the people growing up in the '60s, like myself, during those colonial times going up to independence, and you will find most of the population now, the young generation now, they went to school with a map that was half a map. So, you will find that most Papua New Guineans, they will know where New York City is, they will know where London is, they will tell you where Nairobi is. But if you ask them about Soro or Mindiptana or maybe even Jayapura, they cannot tell you. Maybe three quarters of the population will not be able to tell you where those places are. Because there was a deliberate policy during colonial times for Papua New Guineans not to know the other side of the border.

But despite that policy I would say that a lot of Papua New Guineans have come to know, because that struggle could not be kept out of the public domain, public knowledge, since '62 and especially '69. There's been a lot of refugees coming into Papua New Guinea from West Papua so through the refugee influx into Papua New Guinea people began to realise there's

another side of New Guinea, and these people are also the same people as us, in looks, language, tribal custom, everything. I think that a lot of people in PNG, morally, they sympathise and support the struggle of West Papuans. But that has not been translated into concrete support, material or active support. If the network is developed and takes advantage of this natural sympathy for the West Papuans, I believe that sympathy can be transformed into very active support and we can help to change the situation for West Papuans. I don't expect that change to come from the government, it will come from the people. But it's up to the West Papuan network organisation and the solidarity organisations in Papua New Guinea to take advantage of that sympathy.

You can see it from all the refugees coming over to Papua New Guinea. They have not been looked after by the government, because the government does not think it has to look after them. Most of them, initially when they come they are kept in camps, but they sustain themselves on traditional land. And after they leave the camps they are often then taken in by local people. In Papua New Guinea, in our psychology, we can't understand people leaving their land. Therefore, people generally sympathise with them because there has to be a dramatic event for people to leave their land. You can also see this in our government's policy on the refugees, these boat people from Afghanistan/Iraq. Partly it is the Australian government taking advantage of its dominance over the PNG government, but it did not find a lot of opposition in PNG; people are generally sympathetic with the refugees; they realise that for people to leave their land in Afghanistan or Iraq or Iran, it is because there is a serious problem. Even if

people from Iraq/Iran wanted to stay in PNG, I think they would find a lot of sympathy among local people. But they want to go to Australia so that's another matter.

**Australia really remains a dominant power over Papua New Guinea. It's October now, and Papua New Guinea had its independence celebration last month. It's been 28 years since independence, which isn't very long; Papua New Guinea was one of the last colonised countries to get independence, at least theoretically. If you could, give us a reappraisal of 30 years since independence and where you think Papua New Guinea is now.**

Well, Papua New Guinea now, to put it very frankly, is more a colony of Australia than during colonial times. Because if you look at colonial times, the colony was more a liability to Australia; socially it was not a fully developed country state. And Australia did not really develop the colony. It was more a burden, because they were spending more and getting less. And independence was good for Australia because they passed the burden to the new leaders of Papua New Guinea and let it come under the control of the World Bank/IMF. Independence has been good for Australia, because they offloaded the burden and they were able to benefit more.

Now if you look at all the mines, they are owned by a global subsidiary based in Australia, so there are a lot of profits and revenue going to Australia. They changed the law so that all the mining and oil companies can keep their accounts in New York, London, Sydney or wherever. They used to have all their accounts in PNG. It was a requirement of the law that all the money they made, all the buying and

selling had to be done in PNG. Now the buying and selling, they do it in New York or Japan or wherever, where the mining company or the oil company comes from. They only keep their operating account here in PNG, just to pay the workers, and do some maintenance on the equipment, but everything else is done offshore. We don't actually benefit from these mines or oil companies but the Australians benefit. Australia is a major player in World Bank/IMF, together with the United States, and now they are able to manipulate the country more. For example during the '90s when the World Bank and IMF were giving all these 35 conditions for the government in PNG to follow, part of the conditions was subject to the Australian government's approval.

So if you look at PNG now, there's political independence, but in reality, there has been a re-colonisation; it's been economically re-colonised. And now the Australian government is pushing even for political colonisation through the South Pacific forum and through the intervention force they now implement in the Solomon Islands. They are using the same excuse in PNG; they are saying PNG is on the vege of lawlessness, it's going to succumb to the control of international terrorists, so they need to intervene. They want to directly control; they want to put the civil servants in, they want to put the police in, they're probably going to control the army as well. The reality is, in Papua New Guinea, nothing happens without the Australian government. In all the government departments, you have Australian advisors, in the police, in the army, in the public services, whatever. They're even in the church and NGOs as well. That's why some of us don't want to be involved in the church and NGOs,

because even the NGOs are being controlled by the Australian government.

So Australia, they have strong leverage over the government, they have strong leverage over the church, they have strong leverage over the NGOs, and that's why you see some people like me, who are becoming in the minority, not involved in the government, in the church, in the NGOs. We're just on our own, trying to counter all these forces.

**I've been travelling around a bit here in PNG and one thing I've noticed is that if I see any white people at all they're usually American or German, middle aged, with very large beards and carrying bibles. This isn't just a question of Western missionaries in the squatter settlement camps which encircle Port Moresby; throughout the country you see churches, churches everywhere. I'm glad to say, in Britain there has been some recent militant direct action against missionary organisations who are aiming to reach out to the small amount of tribes in PNG which so far haven't been Christianised. Could you say something about these Christian organisations and Christianity here in PNG?**

Well, if you think that Christianity is an English or American practice, then by coming to PNG you have found that you are totally wrong, because it is more a part of Papua New Guinean culture than it is in England or America (laughs). You are right – Christianity has had a lot of impact in PNG, to the extent that it affects a lot of decisions, a lot of personal choices, a lot of perspectives here in PNG. Maybe there are some positive things, but one of the consequences of Christianity is that it influences people's rational thinking, in

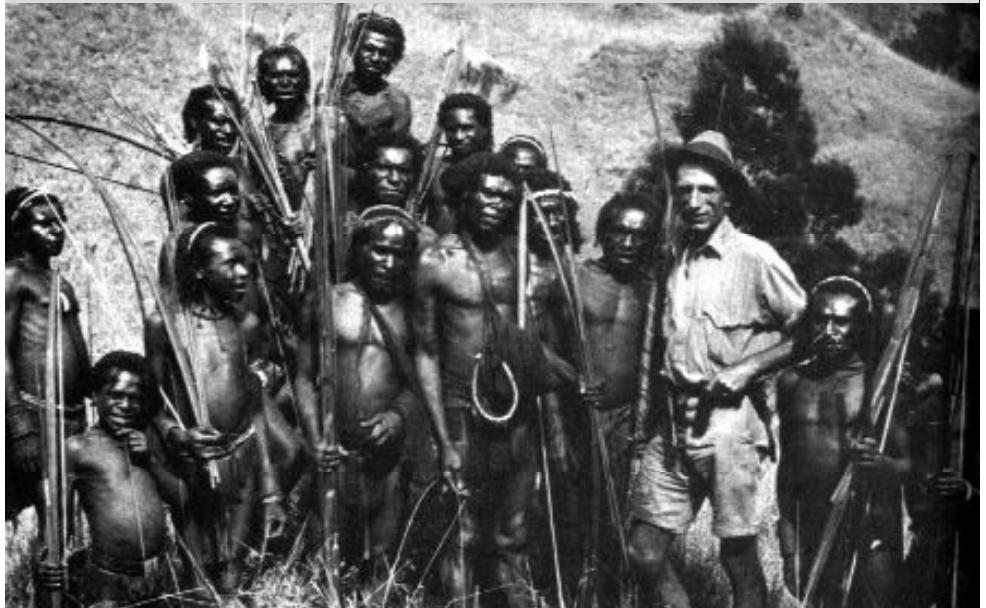
terms of understanding the socio-political realities that they face. Most people's thinking and rationality is based on what the Bible says. When they are faced with a problem they quote the Bible or they refer to a solution from the Bible. This has compounded the problem in PNG for activists like me who are trying mobilise people to challenge global capital, because when people are faced with a socio-political problem they tend to pray or seek a solution in the church.

You can see this in the government, even. When they are faced with problems, people say you should pray more, instead of asking what is the problem, what has caused this problem, how did this problem arise in the first place. They don't do a diagnosis of it and come up with the real solutions to deal with it. No, they say we're not praying enough, we're not going to church enough, we need more guidance from above. So the church has had a lot of impact in PNG, so much so that it has caused people to lose their rational thinking. But this is not to say that people will remain like this absolutely for ever. Of course, the Christian groups are working very hard to maintain the status quo, but I am still optimistic that people will come to the conclusion that we have to deal with socio-economic problems on a socio-economic basis.

I suspect that the church is declining in terms of its impact on the people nowadays. Not as many people are going to church nowadays; not absolutely everyone goes. But it doesn't necessarily follow that they're rejecting the church or they're saying we can find other ways, it's just that they're not getting the answers, they're not finding the solutions so they're moving away. But where are they moving to? That's another problem in itself.



*The vast interior of New Guinea was one of the last areas on earth to be contacted and conquered by Europeans. Only in the late '30s did whites enter the Highlands – home to millions. The initial clash of cultures is within living memory – the upheaval continues.*



People have to be brought back into trying to understand the socio-economic problems; who are the economic players acting to influence things, rather than these problems being a damnation from God. And a lot of people seem to come to the conclusion that it's a damnation from God; if you have Aids, if you have economic problems or if you are faced with all these social problems it's a damnation from God because we are not praying enough, or we are not going to church enough. Also, in PNG many people go to church because they provide a lot of basic services. The government can hardly run services for people; the basic medical services, the schools – they are provided by the church. They have the best schools, they are providing medical centres, so people have these reasons for believing in the church. And there's no reasons to believe in the government!

Also, a lot of people here become Christian not because of faith but because church has become like a custom here in PNG; you are compelled to go to church because it's the norm. It's become a custom, like exchanging gifts at a wedding – if you don't do it, people will look down on you.

Then there is a section of the population who really believe in the church. They have absolute belief and it's very hard to change these people. Some of these people are the ayatollah types, like in Iran, and it's dangerous to speak against Christianity. These fundamentalist Christians seem to think that what the Bible says is absolute truth, it cannot be challenged. If you challenge it, you are in the minority and you can be fearful for your life.

**The process of re-colonisation and industrialisation in PNG has happened**

**in a very short period of time. Some parts of Papua New Guinea were 'undiscovered' 70, 80 years ago, undiscovered by anyone apart from the Papua New Guineans who were living there of course, and at least undiscovered by capital. But now things have modernised rapidly; for example you get lots of the basic old 19th century technologies absent here, like trains. Instead people fly everywhere if they don't get a boat or walk; there's an uneven level of mass industrial development that's happened in a relatively short period of time – 40, 50 years – within the memory of people who are middle-aged.**

**Normally in interviews like this people are asked what they think the situation will be like in their country in ten years time. And the situation in ten years can be, in reality, not that different. However, the situation in some of the territories of PNG today is radically different to their situation twenty or thirty years ago. What do you think is going to happen in 10 years? What situation will PNG be in?**

I think if we don't change course, the alienation of the people will be almost absolute. We will be landless, or the land will be useless to us because it won't be fertile anymore, the resources will be gone, the money will be gone. The money will be gone because most of the goods are imported, services are imported; most of the companies operating in PNG are foreign ones so all the profits are repatriated. On top of that we have a big debt; almost half of the annual budget goes toward servicing World Bank and IMF international loans. When MelSol started in '87 that is what we predicted would happen; that if we do not put a

brake on this then in 10 years time we will be facing this crisis. We haven't managed to change the course, we've only slowed down the pace. But in terms of opening the economy and country up to global capital, to companies, it's not been stopped. They're going all the way out to get access to the resources; the logs, the mines, the mineral resources, oil and gas, it's going. The government is so much under their control they cannot slow down, even though the law says in PNG that that's what they should do, they should think about the future generations. And the revenue from all the current projects – mining, logging activities – there's no saving and there's no reinvestment for the future. It's all being used for current expenses and used to service loans. That's what the World Bank wants.

And therefore I think in 10 years time if we don't put a brake on it, PNG will be just like any other country; landless, resourceless, polluted, no money, poor. And we should not be in that position, because when we started the interview we recognised the unique position Papua New Guineans were in, that unlike in other countries we own the land. Through our clan lines, from the past through to the future, we own the land. Therefore we should benefit most from it, but at the end of the day what will people be left with? Just barren land; the rivers will be

polluted, all the trees will be cut down, the fish gone.

I think the only way to arrest this – and we have been trying to arrest this in PNG since the late '80s – the onslaught by the World Bank, the IMF, global capital, we just have to link up with the international movement against it, that's the only way we'll change, it has to be mass international action that will change the world. If the world changes, PNG will change. Otherwise, we are fighting a losing battle in our small corner of the world because the big powers out there have a lot of power. They have leverage on the government – they have more access to our armed forces and the police than the local people! Here, the local people cannot get any assistance from the local police, but if the mining companies say we need police to be deployed, yes, of course they'll go. Or if we need assistance from the army, we won't get any help, but if the mining company says we have a law and order problem, immediately they'll send the defence force. So you can see it for yourself. They've got the army at their disposal, they've got the police, they've got security guards, they've got guns. Local people have nothing, but people are still resisting and we have to keep on resisting. But we need to join the global movement and we need the global movement to be strong, that's the only way into the future.

